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SUBJECT: Comoran Students Look Abroad For Opportunity

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Comoran education and foreign ministry officials express growing concern about the trend in Comoran students going abroad far and wide seeking educational opportunities. Thousands of Comorans study in more than 30 countries, some with scholarships, some self-financed and most obtaining legitimate educations. However, our Comoran contacts report a trend toward more Comoran students being exposed to "radical influences" at some destinations. Foreign Minister Jaffar bemoans the "lack of information and control" of where these students go and "what becomes of them." END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Minister of Education Afritaine and Foreign Minister Jaffar have often expressed to EmbOffs their frustration at lack of information and "control" of the thousands of Comorans studying abroad. They express their interest in matching returning students to job opportunities back home in the Comoros, but also note that some students are exposed to "radical influences." Some of these return to the Comoros and others join Islamist terror organizations; the most extreme example is Comoran-born Harun Fazul, the al-Qaeda mastermind suspected of being behind the 1998 bombings of U.S. Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. The Grand Mufti, government-appointed guardian of Muslim values, shares the concern of many Comoran Imams and elders about the ideas expressed by some Comorans returning from abroad. The Mufti told Comoros Officer, "we are ashamed of Harun Fazul and disown him. We must also work with friends like the Americans to preserve the Comoros' peaceful and open-minded Islam against extremism." The Mufti, well-respected among Comorans but with diminished stature since President Sambi came to office in 2006, criticized the president for his ties to Iran and "shi'ism," both of which he said were inconsistent with Comoran traditions.

¶3. (U) Foreign Ministry Cultural Affairs Director Moutawal shared with Comoros Officer the limited reliable data he had on Comoran students studying abroad:

-- An unknown thousands of French-nationality Comorans study in France, where some 200,000 persons of Comoran origin reside, primarily in Marseilles and Paris. Comoran officials report that Comoran-passport holders have received few scholarships in the last decade and even have difficulty obtaining visas for self-financed study;

-- Egypt pays for 15 Comoran students per year, but about 1,000 Comorans study in Cairo where there is a sizeable Comoran community. Many GOC officials, and the Embassy's one FSN, studied English, Arabic, and other disciplines at Egyptian institutions;

-- Morocco pays each year for 40 Comoran students to study there, but a total of some 800 Comorans are believed to be studying there, including former President Azali's son;

-- Tunisia pays for 15 Comoran students each year;

- Some 200 self-financed Comorans study in Syria;
- Libya pays for 30 Comoran students to study there;
- Sudan offers Comorans 25 scholarships each year;
- Algeria pays for 20 Comoran students each year;
- In recent years, a growing number (perhaps 100) of English-speaking Comoran students have found affordable educational opportunities in Tanzania and Kenya;
- Iran has reportedly promised President Sambi dozens of scholarships for Comorans, but there is no confirmation these have been realized;
- Comoran students are also known to be studying in Guinea, Senegal, Saudi Arabia, Mali, Gabon, Congo/B, Bangladesh, India, and South Africa.

¶4. (SBU) Moutawal manages scholarship programs provided by host governments, but does not have good information on private grants and loans, nor about self-financed students who do not register at the Ministry or obtain a proper exit visa. His counterpart at the University of the Comoros is International Relations Director Youssouff, who also tries to track where Comorans go abroad to study. He emphasized the important role of the University of the Comoros in offering young Comorans opportunities to study at home. Youssouff echoed the regret expressed by other Comoran leaders that with few scholarships to France or the United States, Comorans pursue "dubious" opportunities in other countries. He acknowledged many of the programs in countries above are legitimate and positive for Comoran participants; but not all of them.

¶5. (SBU) Both Moutawal and Youssouff shared anecdotes of Comoran students exposed to radical elements during their studies abroad. Some return to the Comoros, keep a low profile and try to build a following preaching a more radical doctrine than Comoros' traditionally moderate Sunnism. They also fear the "next Harun Fazul," an impressionable young Comoran betraying his peaceful and moderate country by joining international terrorism.

¶6. (SBU) One returned Comoran student, now working in a hotel, approached EmbOffs to share perhaps a common story. Soifine Said told us he received a scholarship from a Saudi charity to study in Malaysia at an international Islamic university. He was expelled, he said, for a relationship he had with an African female classmate. Soifine said strict conservative Islam was taught at the institution and after hours students were exposed to radical ideas. (COMMENT: Soifine's story seems to reflect other Comoran students experiences, though clearly he is biased based on his dismissal, whether or not it was fair. END COMMENT.)

¶7. (SBU) Former President Azali, perhaps the first Comoran leader to acknowledge the problem posed by impressionable young Muslim Comorans studying abroad, established the University of the Comoros in 2005. Some 5,000 students per year study in three-year degree programs including humanities, education, tourism management, and Islamic studies. Every July 5, the day before Comoran National Day, Azali addresses all University students to encourage them to contribute to the future of their country. Soon a fourth year of studies will be added for some majors, allowing graduates to more easily matriculate to graduate programs, like Fulbright Fellowships. Currently one Comoran scholar is studying on a Fulbright grant and in 2008 a professor returned to the Comoros after completing a Humphrey program in English education. To complement the Embassy's training program for primary school teachers, we are actively recruiting Comoran Fulbright and Humphrey candidates. During September, 2008, meetings at the Department, FM Jaffar and Comoran Ambassador to the United States Toihiri raised the issue of scholarships for Comoran students.

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